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Notes on Mandated Child Abuse Reporting Research

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DOES INCREASED MANDATED REPORTING INCREASE CHILD SAFETY?

Raz (2017) states that while mandatory reporting has broad ethical and moral appeal, "no data exist to demonstrate that incremental increases in reporting have contributed to child safety" (p. 2).

Two separate studies compared states and territories with and without universal mandated reporting and found no difference in the total number of confirmed number of reports (Ho, Gross, & Bettencourt, 2017; Krase & DeLong-Hamilton, 2015). Both sets of researchers stated that universal mandatory reporting may not be an effective solution for protecting children experiencing abuse. Krase & DeLong-Hamilton (2015) state, "Over the past few years, policy makers have touted the expansion of Universal Mandated Reporting Laws as the most important response to concerns for under-reporting of suspected child maltreatment. The findings from this study do not necessarily support this assertion" (p. 99). Instead of encouraging universal mandated reporting laws, Krase & DeLong-Hamilton (2015) suggest alternative policies, such as increasing training requirements for mandated reporters. Currently, many mandated reporters are not legally required to receive training on their mandated reporting responsibilities (Krase, 2013). It is also worth noting that while most calls for expanded mandated reporting come after high-profile instances of child sexual abuse, Krase & DeLong-Hamilton's (2015) study did not show differences in the proportion of reports that involved sexual abuse in states with and without universal mandated reporting.

Another study examined trends of child abuse reporting in counties with varying mandated reporting laws and found that while new reporting mandates increased the number of reports made to CPS, it did not necessarily lead to identification of more substantiated victims (Palusci, Vandervort, & Lewis, 2016). The authors pointed out that the unintended consequence of these changes might be to increase the stress on an already overstressed child welfare system. This appears to be supported by Ho, Gross, and Bettencourt's (2017) finding that the probability of making a substantiated report was significantly lower under universal mandated reporting.

Raz (2017) also points out that attempting to increase the number of reports from nonspecialized individuals may actually cause harm. Increases in reporting without corresponding CPS resource increases may overburden the system; "mechanisms to increase reporting do not necessarily include increased funding or additional personnel dedicated to children's services. Accordingly, increased reporting depletes resources that are already spread thin and diverts attention away from children who need it the most" (p. 2).

Further, research supports the concern that increasing mandated reporters may have a negative effect on marginalized communities. Increasing the number of potential mandated reporters may decrease the number of safe resources that children or families can turn to for confidential support. Families experiencing poverty, for example, may no longer be able to turn to trusted community members for

support and connection to resources for fear that they will be turned into Child Protective Services for neglect. This can especially impact communities of color, who are already more likely to be reported to child protective services (Raz, 2017). "In our desire to ensure the safety of children, we should also ensure that the policies we align ourselves with do not result in unanticipated harm" (Raz 2017, p. 3).

Tanner (2012) conducted qualitative research in Ontario and found that without additional resources, mandatory reporting policies have the potential to push vulnerable populations further away from receiving help.

HAS RESEARCH IDENTIFIED BARRIERS / SUPPORTS REGARDING APPROPRIATE REPORTING?

Research has consistently found that professionals fail to report over half of their suspicions of child abuse to the authorities (Delaronde, King, Bendel, & Reece, 2000; Kenny, 2001b; Kesner & Robinson, 2002, cited in Krase & DeLong-Hamilton, 2015). This suggests a clear policy direction to focus on training those who are already mandated on how to actually carry out those duties. Additional research also supports that education and training for mandated reporters is badly needed (Feng, Chen, Fetzer, Feng, & Lin, 2012; Pietrantonio et al., 2013).

Qualitative interviews with mandated reporters found the ethical and legal challenges to reporting suspected child abuse were complex. Based on the interviews, the authors identified the need for supportive structures and education to help mandated reporters meet their reporting obligations. (Feng, Chen, Fetzer, Feng, & Lin, 2012)

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